



The Holy See

HOLY MASS AND EUCHARISTIC PROCESSION
TO THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAJOR
ON THE SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Square in front of the Basilica of Saint John Lateran
Thursday, 22 May 2008*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the strong season of the liturgical year which, focusing on Easter spreads over three months - first the 40 days of Lent, then the 50 days of Eastertide -, the liturgy has us celebrate three Feasts which instead have a "synthetic" character: the Most Holy Trinity, then *Corpus Christi*, and lastly, the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What is the precise significance of today's Solemnity, of the Body and Blood of Christ? The answer is given to us in the fundamental actions of this celebration we are carrying out: first of all we *gather* around the altar of the Lord, to *be together in his presence*; secondly, there will be the procession, that is *walking with the Lord*; and lastly, *kneeling before the Lord*, adoration, which already begins in the Mass and accompanies the entire procession but culminates in the final moment of the Eucharistic Blessing when we all prostrate ourselves before the One who stooped down to us and gave his life for us. Let us reflect briefly on these three attitudes, so that they may truly be an expression of our faith and our life.

The first action, therefore, is *to gather together* in the Lord's presence. This is what in former times was called "*statio*". Let us imagine for a moment that in the whole of Rome there were only this one altar and that all the city's Christians were invited to gather here to celebrate the Saviour who died and was raised. This gives us an idea of what the Eucharistic celebration must have been like at the origins, in Rome and in many other cities that the Gospel message had reached. In every particular Church there was only one Bishop and around him, around the Eucharist that he celebrated, a community was formed, one, because one was the blessed Cup and one was the Bread broken, as we heard in the Apostle Paul's words in the Second Reading (cf. I Cor 10: 16-

17). That other famous Pauline expression comes to mind: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3: 28). "You are all one"! In these words the truth and power of the Christian revolution is heard, the most profound revolution of human history, which was experienced precisely around the Eucharist: here people of different age groups, sex, social background, and political ideas gather together in the Lord's presence. The Eucharist can never be a private event, reserved for people chosen through affinity or friendship. The Eucharist is a public devotion that has nothing esoteric or exclusive about it. Here too, this evening, we did not choose to meet one another, we came and find ourselves next to one another, brought together by faith and called to become one body, sharing the one Bread which is Christ. We are united over and above our differences of nationality, profession, social class, political ideas: we open ourselves to one another to become one in him. This has been a characteristic of Christianity from the outset, visibly fulfilled around the Eucharist, and it is always necessary to be alert to ensure that the recurring temptations of particularism, even if with good intentions, do not go in the opposite direction. Therefore *Corpus Christi* reminds us first of all of this: that being Christian means coming together from all parts of the world to be in the presence of the one Lord and to become one with him and in him.

The second constitutive aspect is *walking with the Lord*. This is the reality manifested by the procession that we shall experience together after Holy Mass, almost as if it were naturally prolonged by moving behind the One who is the Way, the Journey. With the gift of himself in the Eucharist the Lord Jesus sets us free from our "paralyses", he helps us up and enables us to "*proceed* ", that is, he makes us take a step ahead and then another step, and thus sets us going with the power of the Bread of Life. As happened to the Prophet Elijah who had sought refuge in the wilderness for fear of his enemies and had made up his mind to let himself die (cf. I Kgs 19: 1-4). But God awoke him from sleep and caused him to find beside him a freshly baked loaf: "Arise and eat", the angel said, "else the journey will be too great for you" (I Kgs 19: 5,7). The *Corpus Christi* procession teaches us that the Eucharist seeks to free us from every kind of despondency and discouragement, wants to raise us, so that we can set out on the journey with the strength God gives us through Jesus Christ. It is the experience of the People of Israel in the exodus from Egypt, their long wandering through the desert, as the First Reading relates. It is an experience which was constitutive for Israel but is exemplary for all humanity. Indeed the saying: "Man does not live by bread alone, but... by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8: 3), is a universal affirmation which refers to every man or woman as a person. Each one can find his own way if he encounters the One who is the Word and the Bread of Life and lets himself be guided by his friendly presence. Without the God-with-us, the God who is close, how can we stand up to the pilgrimage through life, either on our own or as society and the family of peoples? The Eucharist is the Sacrament of the God who does not leave us alone on the journey but stays at our side and shows us the way. Indeed, it is not enough to move onwards, one must also see where one is going! "Progress" does not suffice, if there are no criteria as reference points. On the contrary, if one loses the way one risks coming to a precipice, or at any rate more rapidly distancing oneself from the goal. God created us free but he did not leave us alone: he made

himself the "way" and came to walk together with us so that in our freedom we should also have the criterion we need to discern the right way and to take it.

At this point we cannot forget the beginning of the "Decalogue", the Ten Commandments, where it is written: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20: 2-3). Here we find the meaning of the third constitutive element of *Corpus Christi*: kneeling in adoration before the Lord. Adoring the God of Jesus Christ, who out of love made himself bread broken, is the most effective and radical remedy against the idolatry of the past and of the present. Kneeling before the Eucharist is a profession of freedom: those who bow to Jesus cannot and must not prostrate themselves before any earthly authority, however powerful. We Christians kneel only before God or before the Most Blessed Sacrament because we know and believe that the one true God is present in it, the God who created the world and so loved it that he gave his Only Begotten Son (cf. Jn 3: 16). We prostrate ourselves before a God who first bent over man like the Good Samaritan to assist him and restore his life, and who knelt before us to wash our dirty feet. Adoring the Body of Christ, means believing that there, in that piece of Bread, Christ is really there, and gives true sense to life, to the immense universe as to the smallest creature, to the whole of human history as to the most brief existence. Adoration is prayer that prolongs the celebration and Eucharistic communion and in which the soul continues to be nourished: it is nourished with love, truth, peace; it is nourished with hope, because the One before whom we prostrate ourselves does not judge us, does not crush us but liberates and transforms us.

This is why gathering, walking and adoring together fills us with joy. In making our own the adoring attitude of Mary, whom we especially remember in this month of May, let us pray for ourselves and for everyone; let us pray for every person who lives in this city, that he or she may know you, O Father and the One whom you sent, Jesus Christ and thus have life in abundance. Amen.